



Introduction

The Capitol State Forest, located southwest of Olympia in the Black Hills, is both a timber-producing forest and a popular recreation destination. Its 91,650 acres draw an estimated 800,000 visitors each year for hiking, horseback riding, camping, mountain bicycling, off-road vehicle use, hunting, nature study, sightseeing and more.

See Appendix A for a description of the history of recreation in Capitol State Forest.

This forest is part of the legacy of public lands managed by the Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR). DNR manages more than five million acres of state-owned forest, aquatic, agricultural and urban lands for long-term benefits to current and future trust beneficiaries and the people of Washington. As a “working forest”, Capitol State Forest continues to be a place where people work and play outdoors, as planned harvesting and reforestation bring a stream of revenue to schools and county trusts, and where native plants and animals and their habitats thrive.

This plan is intended to guide how DNR manages recreation and public access in Capitol State Forest. It outlines the forest’s recreation goals, the priorities for maintenance of existing recreation facilities, improvements to existing recreation facilities, and the potential development of new recreation opportunities within the forest. Specific action steps to be taken over the next ten years toward achieving the overall vision are also described.

Statewide, since 1970, DNR-managed trust lands have produced more than \$5.7 billion in revenue, reducing the need for taxes to pay for public projects and services.

A forest with a job to do

Like many of the uplands that DNR manages, the lands in Capitol State Forest are trust lands. Some were granted by Congress in 1889 at statehood; others are Forest Board trust lands, purchased or acquired later. By law, state-owned trust lands are managed to produce income for schools, universities, state institutions, county services, and the state General Fund.

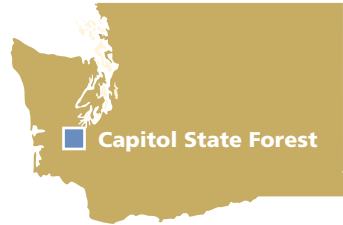
Since 1971, state law (Chapter 79.10.100 RCW) directs DNR to allow multiple use (i.e., recreational areas, trails, hunting, fishing, etc.) on trust uplands. The multiple use must be consistent with the applicable trust provisions of the various lands involved, and be in the best interests of the state and the general welfare of the citizens.

In managing Capitol State Forest, DNR works to:

- Protect the long-term health of the forest’s ecosystems, including wildlife habitat and water quality
- Responsibly harvest timber to provide revenue for local services in Thurston and Grays Harbor counties; for construction of kindergarten through 12th grade public schools for Washington State University, University of Washington, Capitol buildings and state charitable institutions

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- Provide public recreational and educational opportunities
 - Respect forest neighbors and preserve forestland in an area of increasing residential and commercial development

Statewide recreation role



Across the state, DNR's recreation program maintains and operates 143 recreation sites and more than 1100 miles of trails—some motorized and non-motorized, many are multiple use. Forest roads on trust lands provide access to designated recreation sites and access for dispersed recreation, including hunting, fishing, berry and mushroom picking, and sightseeing.

DNR's facilities complement those offered by other agencies across the state. These include federal agencies, such as the USDA Forest Service and National Park Service; state agencies, such as the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and State Parks; and quasi-private land managers, such as Tacoma Power and Light. Many of these agencies offer facilities that are more developed, require fees or take reservations. In contrast, DNR's recreation facilities are on a first-come, first-served, no-fee basis. For large group events, consisting of 25 people or more, a permit from the department is required.

Capitol State Forest and vicinity

The recreation opportunities offered in Capitol State Forest are consistent with DNR's authority to construct, operate and maintain primitive outdoor recreation facilities (RCW 79.10.140). In providing facilities of primitive character, DNR offers recreation users a natural experience—no electrical services, sewage dumps, flush toilets or showers are available. Some DNR-managed facilities provide access to drinking or stock use water.

The Capitol State Forest is managed by DNR's Pacific Cascade Region and is located in the southwest portion of Washington State. Recreation and public access in the forest is managed through the region's Pacific Crest Conservation and Recreation District, in conjunction with the Asset Management and Protection Division's recreation program based in Olympia.

As one of the largest blocks of forestland the department manages, Capitol State Forest's intricate forest road system offers access opportunities to citizens by providing over 575 miles of roads. Upon reaching the forest, recreation users can choose from many recreation opportunities and facilities, including seven campgrounds, four trailheads, a self-guided interpretative area, and a trail system with approximately 160 miles of trail.

Figure 1: State of Washington map with counties and DNR region boundaries outlined



Statewide recreation funding

As is the case with other state programs and agencies, the recreation program within the Department of Natural Resources has seen a shrinking budget. During the last ten years, the statewide recreation budget has been reduced by nearly 50 percent (in today's dollars). This reduction in funding resulted in limited recreation site closures, reduced staff, reduced level of service at some facilities, and fewer capital improvement projects. At the same time, there is an increase in visitors on DNR-managed trust lands throughout the state.

The department receives its recreation funding from several different sources. A large portion of the funding comes from the Nonhighway Off-Road Vehicle Account (NOVA). This is revenue collected from the statewide gasoline tax. Every time a driver purchases fuel in Washington State, a small percentage of the fuel tax paid goes toward funding recreation. Another portion of the budget comes from the state's General Fund. These are general tax dollars appropriated by the Legislature to the department to manage recreation. A third source of funding is grants from organizations such as the Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation (IAC).

DNR applies for several IAC grants each year to help fund recreation facilities maintenance and improvements. This grant funding is not guaranteed. The department competes on a project-by-project basis against other state and federal agencies and private organizations. In order to compete for grants, DNR must have the ability to provide matching funds such as providing staff resources and a portion of the supplies and equipment.

Capitol State Forest recreation funding

Capitol State Forest constitutes the largest portion of the recreational opportunities within the Pacific Cascade Region. As with the statewide funding, recreation funding within the region has decreased by approximately 40 percent since 2001.

As the department manages recreation in Capitol State Forest, it must do so in a sustainable manner. In other words, DNR must have funding in place to maintain current recreation activities in a manner that protect the environment, is compatible with resource management objectives, and provides for safe recreation opportunities. If these criteria are met, DNR will begin considering the expansion of existing facilities and trails or the construction of new sites or different opportunities.

More and more guests continue to visit Capitol State Forest each year. DNR staff has applied for numerous grants from the Interagency Agency Committee for Outdoor Recreation (IAC) over the past four years in an attempt to maintain the recreation opportunities in the forest in the wake of budget shortfalls. This grant funding, which is critical for the management of Capitol State Forest, totals more than \$700,000 and has funded projects such as:

- Motorized and non-motorized trail maintenance
- Recreation planning
- Trail improvements such as bridges and culverts
- An Education and Enforcement Officer

Over the last four years DNR has improved over 30 miles of motorized trails in the forest using grant funds from IAC.

These grant-funded projects continue to be supported by many volunteers, recreation clubs and user groups. Volunteer groups support these grants by contributing volunteer hours which are used as matching funds.

If funding continues to be reduced and grants are not available to assist with trail and facility maintenance, recreation and access opportunities in the Capitol State Forest may be limited, in order to meet environmental protection and public safety objectives.

Recreation planning efforts

In 2000, DNR received two grants from the Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation (IAC) to conduct a recreation planning process in which input from recreation users, neighbors, interest groups and citizens at large was used to create recommendations for this recreation and access plan. The purpose of the plan is to provide direction for a desired future, guide wise use of resources, and support future IAC grant requests.

The planning process builds upon past planning efforts, including the *Capitol Forest Resource Management Guidelines* written in 1981, the *Capitol State Forest Recreation Plan* and the *Capitol State Forest Recreation Plan Addendum* completed in the 1990s.

During the 1990s, the *Capitol State Forest Recreation Plan* and its addendum provided direction on project-specific improvements by identifying the development needs, as recommended by DNR staff, for existing recreation facilities within the forest. The recreation guidelines within this plan addressed the following:

- Direct ORV use to the northern half of the forest and equestrian use to the southern half
- Allow mountain biking and hiking year-around throughout the entire forest
- Allow hunting throughout the entire forest
- Restrict trail use to the dry time of the year
- Allow access year-around, except when public safety is in jeopardy
- Manage identified areas with unique geographical and education values
- Continue to develop a trail system to access frequently sought after destinations

Both the *Capitol State Forest Recreation Plan* and the *Capitol State Forest Recreation Plan Addendum* have outlived their usefulness. The specific improvement projects outlined in these documents have been completed. The guidelines continue to be relevant today; but they need to be revised and expanded upon as recreational use continues to grow and recreation management becomes more complex.

Capitol Forest Resource Management Guidelines estimated 15,000 recreation users visit Capitol State Forest each year. The Recreation Management Goal, as stated in the guidelines is:

Continued current-level recreational opportunities for the public within this block of trust ownership will be provided concurrently with timber harvest and intensive forest management.

The Citizens Working Group met 10 times over a year and came up with several great ideas that were adopted into this plan.

Planning process

The planning process relied on multiple modes to gather information. Public participation was generated by input from a citizen-working group, recreation user surveys and individual contacts. Staff input and archival information provided background information and direction in developing this plan. The State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) process allowed for additional public input on the draft document.

Three core teams—Fuzzy Top, Larch Mountain and Rock Candy—named for the three highest peaks in Capitol State Forest, were developed for the planning effort:

1. The Fuzzy Top Team provided management oversight to the planning process and approval of the plan's recommendations. The members of this group included recreation clubs:

- Pacific Cascade's Region and State Lands Managers
- Asset Management and Protection Division's Assistant Division Manager and Division Manager
- A member of DNR Executive Management
- Black Hills District Manager
- Pacific Cascade Region Conservation and Recreation Manager
- Pacific Cascade Region Volunteer Coordinator
- Recreation Program Manager and Parks Planner

*17 citizens
were chosen to
assist with the
development
of this plan from
more than
42 applications
received.*

2. The Larch Mountain Team was made up of DNR staff working directly on developing the plan by coordinating citizen input, initiating the SEPA, and overseeing the internal review of the plan in the agency. Team members were:

- Pacific Cascade Region Conservation and Recreation Manager
- Pacific Cascade Region Volunteer Coordinator
- Recreation Program Parks Planner

3. The Rock Candy Team, also known as the Citizen Working Group, included 17 community members representing various interests, such as motorized and non-motorized trail users, campers and area neighbors. The role of this team was to represent the recreation user groups and neighbors of the forest at scheduled meetings, relaying information to the recreation user groups and neighbors, and funneling their feedback to the rest of the citizen working group and DNR staff.

Input from the public included:

- Inviting existing recreation users to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to recreation in Capitol State Forest at the Annual Recreation User Group meeting (January 2002). Common themes developed during this exercise are described in detail in Part III, and Appendix F.
- Surveying the public, including forest recreation users and neighbors, asking them to respond to questions regarding types of activities, patterns of use, concerns about the forest and general demographics. More than 400 surveys were returned between April and December 31, 2002. A summary of the findings can be found in Part III, Public Participation.
- Convening the citizen working group, a.k.a. Rock Candy Team, to explore specific areas of concern and recommend a preferred alternative. Over the course of ten months, the group met to discuss pressing issues and develop recommendations based on three scenarios developed by the Larch Mountain Team. See Appendix E for a timeline of the Rock Candy Meetings.
- Completing the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) process for the plan. During the SEPA process, there was an opportunity for public comment regarding the plan.

The plan was approved by the Commissioner of Public Lands in early 2005.

Use of the plan

The use of this Capitol State Forest Recreation and Public Access plan is three-fold:

- Provide a long-term vision of recreation and public access in the forest by detailing recreation management goals,
- Present specific objectives and strategies to DNR staff to guide recreation and access management over the next ten years
- Supplement future IAC grant requests with information from this plan.